

## **Coordinators for the Committee for Church Unity**

June 11, 2014

To: the Councils of all Canadian and American Reformed Churches

Esteemed brothers:

At the recent Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) held at Visalia, California from June 2-5, 2014, a colloquium (learned discussion) was held on covenant views in the United Reformed Churches and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). A one-hour colloquium was held on the floor of Synod between Dr. Ted VanRaalte and Dr. Jason VanVliet of the CanRC and Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema of the URCNA. A one-hour question period followed this, allowing for questions from delegates to Synod Visalia. This colloquium was held at the suggestion of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) of the URCNA.

Prior to the colloquium, the two URCNA brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the URCNA, and the two CanRC brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the CanRC. It was made clear at the colloquium that two men cannot speak for an entire federation but that what was presented was fairly representative of the federation. The papers were the basis for the discussion at the colloquium. These papers were distributed to all the Councils of the URCNA federation prior to Synod Visalia. Herewith we as coordinators for church unity are distributing the papers to all the Councils of the CanRC. We waited with doing so until after the colloquium took place because the colloquium was only a proposal from CERCU and this proposal first had to be adopted by Synod Visalia.

When reading the papers, you will notice that there are no significant differences regarding covenant views. The colloquium itself also led to no disagreement, and the four participants concluded that we are on the same page regarding covenant views. The colloquium was a very positive experience and helped to clear up misunderstandings. Both of the undersigned were present at the colloquium and attended Synod Visalia for its duration as fraternal delegates representing the CanRC. We received much positive feedback about the colloquium from the delegates of Synod. There was talk of an audio recording of the colloquium and the question period; if this becomes available, it will in all likelihood be posted on the website of the URCNA at [www.urchna.org](http://www.urchna.org). May our Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, use the colloquium to move the URCNA and the CanRC closer together in our unity talks.

Synod Visalia also dealt with a recommendation from the advisory committee of Synod which dealt with the CERCU report to the effect that Synod encourage CERCU in its plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that the URCNA proceed to Phase Three A of church unity with the CanRC; this would mean that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, CERCU would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*. This was “tabled indefinitely,” which according to *Robert’s Rules of Order* means that Synod Visalia did not want to adopt or defeat this recommendation, choosing instead to postpone a decision about it. This decision shows that the URCNA is not ready to proceed further with concrete steps toward merger at this time. While this decision is disappointing for us as CanRC, we can be thankful that the recommendation was not defeated but tabled indefinitely. With the time remaining in our mandate as coordinators for church unity, we will continue to build relationships within the American section of the URCNA, and we will try to cultivate a will to ecumenism, as we have been doing. We will see how the LORD decides to bless our efforts in the future.

Synod Visalia did adopt a recommendation of the advisory committee that the churches seriously consider which, if any, specific articles or stipulations of the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) they believe should be changed before the PJCO can be adopted for a united federation, and that the churches seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their Classes.

Furthermore, Synod Visalia, in keeping with Synod Nyack 2012, reiterated that each Classis and Consistory continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting CanRC ministers to fill pulpits, inviting CanRC representatives to Classes, seeking open dialogue with CanRC brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with CanRC congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection.

As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium and the conclusions that can be drawn from it are another step on that road. Our increasing contact as coordinators with churches and Classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC. Please remember in your congregational prayers the efforts toward unity. “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps 127:1).

Brotherly greetings,

Rev. William den Hollander  
Rev. Clarence J. VanderVelde

## **Summary of the Doctrine of the Covenants: A URCNA Perspective**

Cornelis P. Venema and W. Robert Godfrey

June, 2014

### **Introduction**

We have been asked by the CERCU of the URCNA to address the question whether our federations' (URCNA and CaRCs) hold to different views of the doctrine of the covenant, and whether these views, though different, fit within the boundaries of acceptable teaching, as these boundaries are defined by the Three Forms of Unity. In order to fulfill this mandate, we decided to focus upon two doctrinal matters: 1) the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant relationship between God and the human race in Adam (commonly termed the "covenant of works"); and 2) the doctrine of the covenant of grace, particularly in respect to its relationship to the doctrine of election. We believe that these are the two primary topics where there may be differences between our two federations.

It should be observed that we do not intend to offer a summary in what follows that fully expresses the diversity of opinion that obtains within the URCNA. What we present is a summary of what we believe is a common understanding of these topics within the URCNA. The key questions are: Are these opinions in conformity to, or within the boundaries set by, the Three Forms of Unity? Are they opinions that the CaRCs believe are within confessional boundaries?

### **The Pre-fall Covenant ("covenant of works")**

We believe that the following theses summarize a common view of the pre-fall covenant, which is held by many in the URCNA to conform to the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity:

1. Adam's obedience to the requirements of his pre-fall fellowship with the Triune Creator was the "condition" for his continuance in and entrance into further life in blessed fellowship with God. The "life" implicitly promised (indeed, the promise of "eternal life" in immutable fellowship with God; cf. Gen. 3:22) in this fellowship would not be a "free gift" of God's *saving grace*, but a covenanted reward granted in the way of (and in no other way) of Adam's "perfect obedience." What Adam would have received from his Triune Creator, were he to have obeyed the requirements of the pre-fall covenant, would fully accord with divine truth and justice. (See Belgic Confession, Article 14, the "commandment of life"; HC Lord's Day 3.6, "so that [aus dass] he might live with Him in eternal blessedness"; HC Lord's Day 16.40.)
2. Adam's "justification" prior to the fall, though a matter of his "reputation" by God's declaration (forensic), was not on account of the righteousness of Another, but on account of a righteousness which was his own (though his by virtue of God's favor, enablement and provision). Prior to the fall into sin, Adam was properly reckoned to be righteous by God, but this was not an act of God's saving grace in Christ (see

Rom. 5:12-21). Even if Adam's enjoyment of justification and eternal life would not be "merited" by "strict justice" (because it depended upon God's covenanted promise to grant him life on condition of his obedience), it would be granted him as a reward for his obedience. In this respect, it would be a "covenanted merit" or reward based upon Adam's obedience to the condition of the covenant.

3. The justice and truth of God satisfied through the work of Christ, the second Adam, consists in His active and passive obedience. For this reason, we speak (and the confessions consistently speak) of Christ's "merits" or of His "meriting" for us righteousness, favor and eternal life. (See, for example, Belgic Confession, Article 20-23; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2-7, 16.40, 23-24.)
4. The Reformed tradition (including Calvin) has always fully concurred with the "distinction" (yes, even a repugnance) between "law" and "gospel," when it comes to the decisive matter of the believer's free justification. (See Belgic Confession, Article 22-23; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2,21,23-24,44; Calvin Comm. Jn. 1:17; Rom. 4:15; Gal. 3:19; 2 Cor. 3:6; Deut. 7:9; Institutes II.ix.4; II.7.16; Bavinck, GD, vol. 3, par. 349: "wettisch [and not an] Evangelisch verbond.")
5. The Reformed objection to Rome is not that it uses the language of "merit," but that it speaks of the believer's "merit" rather than acknowledging the perfection, the sufficiency and the power of the merit of Christ imputed to us for justification.
6. Thus, everything that constitutes a necessary and sufficient basis for affirming a pre-fall covenant of works in distinction from a post-fall covenant of grace is set forth in the Three Forms of Unity. (See, for example, Belgic Confession, Articles 14,20,22,23,24; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3-6,15-17,23-24; Canons of Dort Head of Doctrine II; III.2.)

## **The Covenant of Grace**

In the following summary, we begin with points (#1-3) where there is little or no difference of expression or emphasis, so far as we can determine, between our two federations. The following points (#4-6) address areas where there may be differences of expression or emphasis.

1. After the fall into sin through the disobedience of Adam, the triune Redeemer instituted a second covenant, the covenant of grace, between Himself and believers and their seed. In the covenant of grace, believers are promised salvation and new life through the work of Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, and are called to faith and obliged unto new obedience.
2. In the historical administration of the covenant of grace, we may distinguish without separating between the "promises" of the covenant and the "demands" or obligations of the covenant. When believers and their children embrace the covenant promises in Christ in the way of faith, they enjoy the "blessings" of the

- covenant—fellowship with the living God through Christ and by His indwelling Spirit, the forgiveness of sins and free justification, the restoration of the image of God, renewal in righteousness by the Spirit, and the promise of everlasting life. When believers and their children do not believe or embrace the covenant promises, or walk in a manner that is consistent with the covenant's demands, they break the covenant and come under God's judgment.
3. Believers and their children may be assured of God's gracious promise to them, which is communicated through Word and sacrament, and be confident in the reliable Word that God speaks to them. The doctrine of election is one that honors God alone as the Savior of His people, and provides a sure basis for the believer's confidence in God's saving power. However, the doctrine of election must be handled with appropriate care, and never be treated in a way that undermines the believer's confidence in God's covenant Word or promise.
  4. It is important to distinguish the covenant of grace in its *historical administration* and the covenant of grace in its *saving efficacy* (sometimes called the "dual aspect" of the covenant). In its substance and saving efficacy, the covenant of grace is the means whereby God saves his elect people in Christ. Redemption is ultimately a divine gift and gracious inheritance granted in Christ to fallen but elect sinners. The covenant of grace, so far as its saving efficacy is concerned, is not merely a "conditional offer" of salvation to those who are "under" the covenant, but it is also the instrument whereby God communicates to his elect people all that is granted them in Christ. With respect to the saving efficacy of the covenant of grace, God grants to the elect all that is theirs in Christ. The very "conditions" that God stipulates in the covenant of grace, are obtained and granted to the elect upon the basis of the perfect work of Christ on their behalf. (See Canons of Dort, II.8; II, Rejection of Errors 3-6.)
  5. The covenant of grace, though it graciously realizes what was typified by the covenant of works, is properly viewed as a "second covenant," and not simply as a re-institution of the covenant relationship. Because Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace, accomplishes all that is necessary for the redemption of His people, and communicates the promise effectually to them by His Spirit, we may not view the promises and demands of the covenant of grace as formally the same as the promises and demands of the covenant of works. Christ gives to His own what He requires of them in the covenant of grace. (See F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Twelfth Topic, Q. 4, #7, 2:191-92 (\*quoted below))
  6. Though the Three Forms of Unity do not expressly speak of the "visible" and "invisible" church, they do distinguish between those who are "externally" in the church but not genuinely members of Christ (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). The distinction between the covenant in its historical administration and the covenant in its saving efficacy, is parallel to the distinction between all believers and their children who are members of the visible church, and the elect who are known to God (2 Tim. 2:19) and who are properly and genuinely members of Christ and

partakers in His saving work. This distinction is an important one to maintain, and is supported by the apostle Paul's distinction between those who enjoy certain covenant privileges but are not, strictly speaking, "children of the promise" in the sense of God's purpose of election (Rom. 9:6-8).

(Note: Regarding the distinction between the "visible" and "invisible" church, we believe that Article 29 of the Belgic Confession is translated properly in the English translation in use in the URCNA. In this translation, the third paragraph reads: "With respect to those who are members of the church, they may be known by the marks of Christians: namely, by faith, *and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior ....*" In the English translation of this Article in the Book of Praise of the CaRCs, the third paragraph omits the "when" of the original French and Latin (it reads: "Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour ...."). Omitting the "when" of the original may suggest a rather different view as to who genuinely belongs to and is of the church of Jesus Christ.)

\*"Nor can it be objected here that faith was required also in the first covenant and works are not excluded in the second .... They stand in a far different relation. For in the first covenant, faith was required as a work and a part of the inherent righteousness to which life was promised. But in the second, it is demanded—not as a work on account of which life is given, but as a mere instrument apprehending the righteousness of Christ (on account of which alone salvation is granted to us). In the one, faith was a theological virtue from the strength of nature, terminating on God, the Creator; in the other, faith is an evangelical condition after the manner of supernatural grace, terminating on God, the Redeemer. As to works, they were required in the first as an antecedent condition by way of a cause for acquiring life; but in the second, they are only the subsequent condition as the fruit and effect of the life already acquired."

## **Summary of the Doctrine of the Covenants: A CanRC Perspective**

Theodore G. Van Raalte and Jason P. Van Vliet

May 2014

### *Introduction*

We have been asked by the CERCU of the URCNA and the CCU of the CanRC to address the question whether our respective federations hold different views of the doctrine of the covenant, and whether these views, though possibly different, fit within the bounds of the Three Forms of Unity (TFU).

To the best of our knowledge, we do not believe that any differences between our federations on the topics of covenant and election are of such a nature that they are beyond the bounds of the TFU and therefore doctrinally suspect. In fact, many of the differences *between us* as federations may well also be differences *within* each of our respective federations. Thus, we have not significantly disagreed with our URCNA brothers Venema and Godfrey, but have pointed out some nuances and further considerations.

We consider it important to note that our CanRC forbears often emphasized that there was no unique “CanRC doctrine/theology/view of the covenant.” They were adamant that they were bound simply by what is found in the TFU and that the churches ought to have a measure of flexibility within those bounds.

In addition, it appears to us that the view of the covenant presented by brs. Godfrey & Venema is substantially the same as that which is presented in the Westminster Standards. Since 2001 the CanRCs have had ecclesiastical fellowship (sister church relationship) with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), which obviously subscribes to the Westminster Standards. Although the doctrine of the covenant was certainly discussed by the OPC and CanRCs in the years prior to 1998, in the end those discussions did not prevent the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship from being established. This official decision of Synod Fergus 1998, which has also been upheld and reconfirmed at every CanRC synod since then, indicates that the CanRCs are willing to work with those hold a Westminster view of covenant theology, without themselves subscribing to the Westminster standards. By the same token, the OPC have not officially objected to any covenant views found within the CanRCs on the basis of their secondary standards. Keeping this broader perspective in mind gives us good hope that the URCNA and CanRCs, both subscribing to the TFU, should be able to find common ground on the doctrine of the covenant.

Finally, we note that the contribution we hereby offer has no official standing in the CanRCs. CERCU and the URCNA Synod will be well aware of the reticence of the CanRCs to adopt position papers and can no doubt appreciate that we are expressing our own views in ways that we think would be helpful for the promotion of unity between the URCNA and the CanRCs.

The considerations below have been crafted in response to questions posed by Drs Godfrey and Venema in an email dated Feb 19, 2014, as well as the summary they have put forward (see “Summary of the Doctrine of the Covenants: A URCNA Perspective”). Thus, our considerations should be understood in that context and not regarded as a comprehensive treatment of the covenant, either pre-fall or post-fall.

Their initial questions were:

- (1) What is the understanding of our respective federations regarding the nature of the pre-fall relationship (or covenant) between God, the Triune Creator, and mankind as represented by Adam? We have attached a short summary of what we believe is a common understanding of this pre-fall relationship within the URCNA (see attachment), and would invite you to comment on it from the perspective of the CanRC’s.
- (2) What is the understanding of our respective federations regarding the nature of the post-fall covenant of grace? We are especially interested in the question of the relation between the formulation of the doctrine of the covenant, with its “promises” and “demands” (conditions? In what sense?), and the doctrine of election. In the URCNA, it is common to speak of the “dual aspect” of the covenant (G. Vos), and to recognize that the conditions of the covenant are ultimately fulfilled in accordance with God’s “purpose of election” (Rom. 9:1 ff.).
- (3) How do the CaRCs regard the decisions of recent URCNA synods— re the doctrine of justification, the federal vision controversy, and the relation between covenant and election? The question is not so much whether the URCNA has (arguably) adopted some form of “extra-confessional binding.” Rather, the question focuses upon whether it is permissible, even necessary, to distinguish between the covenant in its historical administration and the covenant in its substance and efficacy in the salvation of the elect (what is often called the “dual-aspect” of the covenant, or what is expressed by the distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” church).
- (4) In the URCNA, it is commonly believed that Article 29 of the Belgic Confession warrants a distinction between those who truly belong to Christ and his church and those who are “externally” members of the (visible) church. This Article is thought to warrant a distinction like that between the



“visible” and “invisible” church, or the distinction between those who are “in” but not “of” the covenant people of God. What is the understanding of the CanRC’s re this distinction? (Note: We are curious that the English translation of the Article in the Book of Praise, third paragraph, reads: “Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour ....” In our translation, it reads: “With respect to those who are members of the church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior ....” Your translation seems to ignore the “when” of the original French and Latin, and may suggest a rather different view as to who genuinely belongs to and is of the church of Jesus Christ.)

### **Key Considerations concerning the Covenant before the Fall**

#### *Concerning Question 1 and Theses on the Pre-fall Covenant [Venema & Godfrey]*

1. We agree that God’s covenanted reward of “immutable fellowship” would be given in Paradise by way of Adam’s perfect obedience. We agree that Adam was created with the freedom of choice to serve God or not, a freedom he had to exercise rightly, so that he would show in act and fact that he truly loved his God by submitting to his authority and fulfilling the God-given mandates. However, we point out several nuances:
  - a. When God said that his creation was “very good” (Ge 1:31) and when he walked in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve in the Garden *pre-lapsum* (inferred from Ge 3:8) they enjoyed a sinless and uninhibited fellowship with God. Therefore their entrance into “further life” should not be understood to be more than the entrance into a state of *non posse peccare*, or of “immutable fellowship with God” and whatever that entailed. In other words, Adam and Eve already enjoyed the gift of life with God and we should not speak of them as though they lacked any gift or capacity from God, lest we impinge upon created goodness.
  - b. When God threatened the sentence of death in the very day that Adam took of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Ge 2:17), he thereby taught Adam that he had within him the possibility of sinning against God and his neighbour, depending upon the choice of his will. This text, more than Genesis 3:22, ought to be the ground for speaking of Adam’s state of *posse peccare*. The history of redemption and history of revelation teach us of God’s purpose to bring man to the state of *non posse peccare* (e.g., Re 21-22).
  - c. When Adam obeyed God he did so out of a heart of trust in God. His calling was to have that faith in God which took God at his Word, that hope which looked in faith to the time of “immutable fellowship,” and that love which

flowed out of such faith. In other words, while the leading measure of Adam's faithfulness was his "personal, perpetual, and perfect obedience" (WCF 7.2, WLC 20), this loving obedience could only have been present together with faith and hope, and particularly as the fruit of such faith/trust. The Westminster Confession thus uses not only "covenant of works" but also "covenant of life" and indeed theologians of the period also spoke of a "covenant of friendship," "legal covenant," "first covenant," and "covenant of nature."

- d. We caution against stringing together phrases from the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession without due attention to their context, as is done in thesis 1. To wit, the result clause in HC, LD 3.8 "so that he might . . . live with him in eternal blessedness" is not in the context of Adam doing good works but in the context of having been created good – "God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that . . ." The fuller quotation emphasizes that Adam was created in true righteousness, not that he had to earn it.
  - e. In sum, the life implicitly promised would be a covenanted reward granted in the way of Adam's perfect obedience. As a covenanted reward, it would still be a gift out of God's favour to the creature. Adam's prefall obedience should be understood to be the leading measure of his trust in God.
2. We affirm that Adam's righteousness or "justification" prior to the fall was a righteousness of his own, though our typical use of the word "justification" applies it to our post-fall forensic justification in Christ. The reward granted to Adam prior to the fall would indeed have been a reward for his obedience within the terms of his relationship with God, that is, a *meritum ex pacto* that consists in claiming the promises that God is already holding out. In our view, Adam could not have merited his reward by strict justice outside of any covenant terms because that would require the creature to produce something entirely of his own (*ex nihilo*, as it were). But everything, including the terms of Adam's pre-fall relationship with God, is a gift of God (1Co 4:7).

Turretin writes, "From these [foregoing considerations] we readily gather that there now can be no merit in man with God by works whatsoever, either of congruity or of condignity . . . Hence it also appears that there is no merit properly so called of man before God, in whatever state he is placed. Thus Adam himself, if he had persevered, would not have merited life in strict justice, although (through a certain condescension [*synchatabasin*]) God promised him by a covenant life under the condition of perfect obedience . . ." (Turretin, *Institutes*, 2.712; also quoted in *URCNA Report of the Synodical Study Committee on the Federal Vision and Justification*, footnote 52).

3. We agree wholeheartedly with Godfrey & Venema's thesis. Our confessions clearly teach that Christ alone fully merited our salvation and that God imputes to his elect both the active and passive obedience of Christ.

- a. Although the debate generated by Piscator about the imputation of the active obedience of Christ was subsequent to the composition of the BC and HC we affirm that these should be understood to affirm the doctrine, on the grounds that the *textus receptus* of the BC, as improved by the Synod of Dort 1618-1619, clearly affirms the doctrine in Article 22, “he imputes to us all his merits and as many holy works as he has done for us and in our place.” We note also the closing of HC 23.60, “He grants these to me . . . as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me.” Our Form for Lord’s Supper celebration also includes, “By his perfect obedience he has for us fulfilled all the righteousness of God’s law.”
  - b. At the same time we caution against pressing the term “passive obedience” too far, for it does not mean that Christ was not active in pursuing the cross for our sakes, but that he *suffered* for us as the Paschal Lamb. In this case the word “passive” should be understood according to its shared root with the word “passion,” as in the “passion [=suffering] and death” of Christ.
4. We agree that in the decisive matter of the believer’s justification, law and gospel are antithetical concepts. Indeed, to affirm this is fundamental to our salvation, as the various confessional references in this thesis affirm (see further our comments on the role of faith in justification below under Covenant of Grace, Consideration 7). Yet we also affirm that in the language of Scripture the gospel is to be “obeyed” and even includes threats (Jo 3:36, Re 3:14-22, 2Th 1:8, Latin & French of CD 5.14). Scripture thus also speaks of the “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2; 1Co 9:21). Scripture teaches us, too, that the law or Torah is a wonderful instruction of the LORD that is full of promises (Ps 119, Eph 6:2-3). Thus, we caution against an arbitrary dichotomization of Scripture texts containing commands into “law” and those containing promises into “gospel.”
5. We wholeheartedly agree that we may use the language of merit for Christ’s work. We humbly and earnestly confess that Christ has merited our entire salvation. He is our only Saviour, given by grace alone and to be received by faith alone.
6. Venema and Godfrey have affirmed that “everything that constitutes a *necessary and sufficient* basis for affirming a pre-fall covenant of works in distinction from a post-fall covenant of grace is set forth in the Three Forms of Unity.” This would seem to imply that all confessors of the TFU *must* affirm the distinction and perhaps also the terms “covenant of works” and “covenant of grace.”

On the one hand, we agree in affirming the distinction and disjunction between the pre-fall and post-fall situations. Indeed, we affirm a radical discontinuity that must be strongly emphasized so as to avoid Pelagian errors. Without doubt the fellowship in Paradise could not be restored by man himself; it was done and gone *unless* it was restored through Another, a Mediator, and by faith in him. Adam and Eve died spiritually “on that day,” and were thrust permanently from the fellowship in body and soul that they enjoyed with God in the Garden. That fellowship will not be restored fully until our Lord Jesus Christ returns in glory to bring in the new creation.

On the other hand, we do not hold each other to the term “covenant of works,” since the TFU do not require the term. We note that the Westminster Standards also use “covenant of life” (WLC, 20) and speak of the covenants of works and grace as “commonly called” (WLC, 30), implying that other terms are possible. Indeed Reformed theologians have affirmed the radical discontinuity between the pre- and post-fall situations by using other terms for the first covenant such as the covenant of nature or creation (Ursinus), covenant of friendship (Burgess, Ball), legal covenant (Sedgwick), covenant of favour (de Graaf), Adamic administration (Murray), and covenant of love (Stam), among others; as well as terms for the second covenant such as the covenant of reconciliation (Burgess, Ball), covenant of grace (the commonest term), covenant of the gospel (Davenant), or evangelical covenant (Sedgwick). Such terminology can be discussed within the bounds of the TFU, and we should grant each other room for this.

In conclusion, we are in unity with our URC brothers in affirming the uniqueness of Adam’s relationship to God pre-fall compared to his and humanity’s situation post-fall. In other words, Adam’s situation while in a state of righteousness yet able to sin (*posse peccare*) was radically different from our situations in the states of unrighteousness wherein we can only sin (*non posse non peccare*) and of justification by grace through faith wherein we are enabled not to sin (*posse non peccare*).

### **Key Considerations concerning the Covenant after the Fall, or the Covenant of Grace**

*Concerning Questions 2 & 3 and Theses on the Covenant of Grace [Venema & Godfrey]*

1. Concerning the relationship between the covenant of grace and election, it is clear that the two are not identical even though they are connected to each other in significant ways. To mention but one obvious difference, election is a decree that God made before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4), while the covenant of grace is a relationship initiated by God after the fall and in history (Gen 15:18). Furthermore, not every child of the covenant is elect (Rom 9:6-13). In this sense, there is a certain duality in the covenant: there were both elect and reprobate among the circumcised in the OT, just as there are both elect and reprobate among the baptized in the NT. Another way of expressing this is that the circle of the covenant is larger than the circle of the elect.
2. The more challenging question is: what is the best way to describe the aforementioned duality in a scripturally responsible and pedagogically effective way? Over time various terms have been proposed: external and internal, administration and essence (substance), or conditional and absolute. Although

- these terms attempt to express the truth of the previous point (#1 above), they do have limitations. For example, the following can be mentioned:
- a. although not decisive in and of itself, it is noteworthy that these terms do not appear in Scripture or our confessions;
  - b. although the proponents of these terms often wish to prevent it, it does happen that the dual aspect of one covenant becomes, for all intents and purposes, two distinct covenants in the minds of God's people—an external covenant and an internal covenant—while our confessions speaks of one covenant of grace (BC 34; LD 27; CoD 1:17) with two dispensations, old and new (LD 27);
  - c. these terms can leave parents in the pew, who are holding their just-baptized baby, in a state of uncertainty, wondering whether their child is *really* in the covenant or not;
  - d. these terms do not always do full justice to the scriptural reality of covenant breakers and profaners (Lev 26:15; Deut 31:16,20; Mal 2:10; Heb 10:29): if someone is only externally or conditionally in the covenant can he *truly* break it?
3. Considering the aforementioned limitations, it is helpful to take another look at the terminology that is found in Scripture, namely, that of the blessings (Deut 28; Gal 3:7-14) and the curses (Deut 29:1, 9-14; Gal 3:15-18) of the covenant. These passages shift our attention from *aspects* of the covenant to *outcomes* of life within the covenant. Clearly, there are two different outcomes for covenant people, those who believe “are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Gal 3:9) and those who do not embrace Christ by faith are under the curse (Gal 3:13-14). In this way, there is a clear confession of one covenant, while the two outcomes express the duality which was already mentioned in point #1 above.
  4. At the same time, there is more than a difference in outcomes (#3 above), there is also a difference in the way that individual believers live *within* the covenant. Someone can merely “go through the motions” and live within the covenant in a merely external and superficial manner. This is ungodly hypocrisy. Conversely, someone can live within the covenant genuinely, that is to say, from the heart in true dedication to, and with fellowship with, the Lord. This is the way it should be. Yet both kinds of people can be found within the covenant, as the apostle Paul indicates in Rom 2:28-29. Here an analogy may help. The Lord compares his covenant with his people to a marriage covenant (Jer 31:32, Eph 5:22-33, etc). Just as a couple can be truly and legally married yet not live together in true

harmony and love, so too people may be truly and legally part of the covenant, but not live in genuine faith and love toward the LORD.<sup>1</sup>

5. In addition much can be gained by emphasizing the two parts of the covenant: promise and obligation (Gen 17:4, 9; *Form for Baptism*). If the preacher emphasizes both parts, in the right order and in a balanced way, his congregation will not walk away with the impression that one is automatically saved simply because he is baptized. Furthermore, the obligation is, in the first place, a call to trust the LORD and believe in the covenant promises he has given, and then, flowing out of that to also live a life of holiness (LD 23-24, 32-33).
6. The doctrine of election should not overshadow the doctrine of the covenant in such a way that doubt, rather than assurance, is cultivated in the hearts of God's people. Believing parents who bring their covenant child forward to be baptized should be certain that their child belongs truly—not merely possibly or potentially—to the covenant of grace. Along the same lines, the maturing Christian should be fully convinced of the reality of God's promises for him, as well as the reality of his obligations toward God, rather than constantly questioning whether he is elect or not, or whether he is actually in the covenant or not. In this respect, the concluding paragraphs of the Canons of Dort regarding "the consolation of afflicted souls" are very much to the point. We read the Canons of Dort precisely to underline the divine origin, full efficacy, and transforming and preserving power of God's sovereign grace, leading us to assurance rather than doubt.
7. With respect to the role of faith, we need to distinguish carefully between justification and sanctification. With respect to justification, faith relies entirely upon, and accepts, the free gift of Christ's perfect righteousness, satisfaction and holiness. This is what we confess when we say that we are saved only by faith and without any merit of our own (LD 23, 32). With respect to sanctification, faith produces the fruits of good works, as described in the letter of James and summarized in BC 24 ("We believe that this true faith... regenerates him and makes him a new man.")

*Considerations concerning Question 4 and Theses on the Covenant of Grace [Venema & Godfrey]*

1. BC 29 clearly speaks of hypocrites who are *in* the church but not *of* the church. The CanRCs not only confess this truth with the mouth but also believe it with the heart (to borrow some language from BC 1). Thus, the issue is not with

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<sup>1</sup> In its main lines, this is also what L. Berkhof, citing G. Vos, is saying on pp 286-87 of his *Systematic Theology*. It also coheres well with K. Schilder's emphasis on the legal reality of the covenant, even if the communion within the covenant has not yet flourished due to immaturity (in the case of infants) or is being rejected in unbelief (in the case of hypocrites). See Schilder's *Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant*, esp pp 3, 11-12.

confessing the truth that there are hypocrites in the church, or in the covenant (see #4 above), but rather how this sad reality is best described in theological terms. Here the CanRCs tend *not* to use the terms invisible and visible church. To begin with, such terminology is found neither in Scripture nor in our confessions. In addition, past experiences, particularly in the Netherlands in the time surrounding the Liberation of 1944, have taught us that speaking of an invisible church *can* lead to a certain pluriform view of the church which, practically speaking, often compromises the truth we confess in BC 28, namely, everyone's duty to join the church, being active members within it and respecting the authority of local office bearers. In short, the CanRCs have no difficulty with using the *in* the church but not *of* the church distinction, but we generally avoid the terms invisible and visible church for the reasons stated above.

2. Concerning the translation of BC 29, we do not think there is any significant issue here. The sentence in question reads: "With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Saviour, they avoid sin, etc" (URCNA Psalter-Hymnal) or "Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin, etc" (CanRC Book of Praise). The question revolves around the presence of the word "when" (Fr. *quand*). First of all there is a textual issue that adds a certain wrinkle in the translation history of this sentence. The original text of 1561 did not have *quand* *ayans recue un seul Sauveur Iesus Christ*, but rather *ce qu'ils reçoivent un seul Sauveur Iesus Christ*. Now, the *textus receptus* (Synod of Dort 1618-19) certainly does have *quand*, but the different word choice between the original and the *textus receptus* already indicates something about the semantic force of the word *quand* in that sentence. In that case the word is not suggesting that church members must at a certain point in time receive the Lord Jesus Christ in some kind of special conversion experience. Rather, it is logically connecting the various marks, or indications, that ought to be noticeable in the life of a sincere Christian, specifying that the works of sanctification are not simply parallel with the gift of faith, but flow from it. We fully agree with this, as is clear from many other places in the confessions. Whether the word *quand* is there (as in the *textus receptus* & URCNA Psalter Hymnal) or not there (as in 1561 edition & CanRC translation), the meaning of the sentence remains the same. As a matter of interest, an earlier translation of the BC used in CanRC had the word "when" in it (see *Book of Praise* 1972). The word "when" was removed in a linguistic and stylistic revision in the early 1980s. We have consulted some internal archive documents of that revision process, and we have the distinct impression that the change was made simply for linguistic reasons (i.e., ease of English expression) and not theological reasons.